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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 001749

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS MARRED BY IRREGULARITIES,
MANIPULATION AND CHARGES OF FRAUD

REF: A. ALGIERS 1662
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 1658
[1](#)C. ALGIERS 1727 (AND PREVIOUS)
[1](#)D. ALGIERS 1629

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The November 29 local elections in Algeria, while publicly hailed by the Ministry of Interior and Prime Minister as a success, were marred by accusations of irregularities, fraud, controlled media access and charges of intimidation of opposition parties. The results were noteworthy for the poor showing by Islamist parties both within and outside the ruling coalition, and for the strong showing by the previously unimportant Algerian National Front (FNA), which finished in third place overall behind the National Liberation Front (FLN) and National Democratic Rally (RND). While official turnout statistics showed figures of roughly 44 percent, our election monitors in Algiers, Oran and in selected areas of northern Algeria and the Kabylie region gave a figure significantly lower than that, perhaps as low as 30 percent. Overall turnout appears nonetheless to have been higher than the May legislative elections, with very low urban turnout in contrast to higher rural turnout, driven primarily by local and tribal ties rather than faith in the political system. Youth and Islamist voters appear largely to have abstained except in the Kabylie, where youth turnout was strong. Local media also reported scattered protests and violence in the western provinces of Oran, Tlemcen and Mascara on election day. The results were predictable, and may indeed have laid the groundwork for a 2008 call to revise the constitution in order to allow President Bouteflika to run for a third term. In these local elections, we saw the same kinds of process problems that enable government manipulation of the results that we have seen here in elections here since the 1990s. The government's choice not to address such problems is worrisome for the development of Algerian democracy. END SUMMARY.

MONITORING: TRICKY, EVEN WHEN UNIMPEDED

[1](#)2. (C) In the absence of an independent monitoring commission (ref A) or international observers, election monitoring was left to the political parties themselves, and to our own ad-hoc monitoring effort using Embassy staff and contacts across north-central Algeria, the Kabylie and Oran. In one case, one of our local employees served as the volunteer voting director for the entire day at a school in the

lower-middle class Algiers district of El Magharia, Hussein Dey. Our staff, both Algerian and American, observed over 30 different polling stations at various times of the day, but 30 to 40 percent of them were denied access in an often brusque manner. Political parties faced the same challenges as they tried to monitor the elections. Said Sadi, outspoken president of the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), a traditionally Berber party, told us December 3 that RCD representatives were physically prevented from observing the balloting in Tebessa, Chlef and Collo. Sadi, along with Hamid Lounaouci, RCD national secretary responsible for institutional relations, said that they had been on the phone with their representative in Tebessa as he banged on the door of the local polling station demanding access. Sadi also charged that the RCD's victorious candidates in Talassa, a township in the district of Chlef, had been threatened by the local administrator against assuming their elected positions.

(Note: This event may have had more to do with the local FLN administrator's fear of being exposed if new RCD representatives made good on their promise to publicize local records, which Sadi and Lounaouci said were full of evidence of corruption. End Note.)

13. (C) Our observers did report seeing opposition parties such as the RCD, Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and Worker's Party (PT) present to monitor the elections, but given the superior resources of the ruling coalition FLN and RND, observers from these two parties were a more widespread presence than those of any other party. Abdelmajid Menasra, vice president of the Islamist (Muslim Brotherhood) Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP), told us December 2 that the FLN and RND had the fewest problems sending their representatives to observe polling stations. Menasra said that

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representatives of the MSP, the lone Islamist party in the three-party ruling coalition, were also prevented from monitoring the voting at several locations around Algiers, but that "it was not as big of a mess as the May elections." Meanwhile, a MEPI-sponsored program on election monitoring suffered the same effects of these increased sensitivities. The local project implementer told us November 20 that she was struggling to find election monitors because the Algerian university professors who were supposed to coordinate a significant monitoring presence at polling stations around the country had backed down. They refused to go to the stations on election day because "they said they were afraid of the security services."

OFFICIAL TURNOUT FIGURES INFLATED

14. (C) Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni announced on November 30 that official turnout across the country was approximately 44 percent, yet not a single one of our election monitors reported seeing people waiting in line to vote. The voting director at El Magharia in Hussein Dey, Algiers, reported that 60 people voted out of a possible 400 registered voters, for a turnout of 15 percent. Most of these, he observed, were elderly. Other observers noted groups of people standing around at polling places, with plenty of typical weekend activity going on in the neighborhood, but with nobody actually voting. Anecdotal reports from our observers and party representatives such as Sadi, Menasra and Hocine Djeddai, former first secretary of the FFS, reveal a very low turnout in urban areas but a higher turnout based on what Djeddai called "tribal ties" at the local level. A political observer in Oran echoed this, noting that in rural areas the APC (local city council) is often the provider of basic services and therefore its composition is far more relevant to daily life than it is to a resident of Algiers or Oran. Our contact in Oran visited several polling stations around the city, and observed that by 3:00 PM at one station, only 90 out of approximately 1000 voters had cast their ballots -- a figure that matches what our monitors observed and stands in stark contrast to the official statistics. Even the

Algerian Government's official figures put turnout in Algiers at 24 percent and in Oran it was officially 37 percent. In addition, among the roughly eight million said to have cast votes, some 900,000 were nullified, many apparently by the voters themselves as a protest vote.

ADDING UP VOTES BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

15. (C) All of the political party contacts we spoke to said that while they enjoyed varying degrees of access to the polling stations during voting and counting, none of them was allowed to observe the compilation of the votes going up the administrative chain. Sadi of the RCD described the process as one in which votes are counted once at the local level in private, then sent up to the wilaya (provincial) level to be counted again, before being sent to the Interior Ministry in Algiers. At no stage in the vote compilation process, Sadi said, is there any independent observation. Djeddai and Menasra described the process in the same way, saying that neither the FFS or MSP had access to the vote compilation process, and that numbers had a way of "growing" at each successive stage. Because of this phenomenon, Djeddai pointed out on December 4, it is conceivable that after votes are added at the local and wilaya levels, the final statistics that arrive at the Interior Ministry in Algiers actually did indicate a 44 percent turnout, even though that turnout was some 10 to 15 percent higher than reality on the ground.

CHANGING THE RULES AFTER THE FACT

16. (C) Two days after the election, Interior Minister Zerhouni announced that the leadership of a local council would go to the candidate heading the list of the party that received the most votes. Local elections in Algeria do not produce a winner-take-all outcome; rather, seats and control of local and wilaya councils are roughly proportionate to the level of support the parties gain in the election. While party officials such as Menasra and Djeddai conceded that

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assigning control based on majority vote was a democratic decision in principle, they stressed that this should have been announced before the elections and not after. Sadi and Lounaouci of the RCD were outraged, as previously the leadership position of a council had been assigned to the eldest candidate from any of the parties who won a percentage of the vote. They said that the RCD had prepared accordingly, with slates of candidates designed to gain more leadership positions by placing more senior and respected local figures on their lists. According to Djeddai and press reports, this decision was also rejected by the Tuareg tribes of the south, although for the Tuareg it was less a matter of electoral transparency than a blow to tradition. Djeddai said it was inconceivable for a Tuareg to allow young people with political majorities to rule, reducing their elders on the council to a non-executive role.

CONTROLLED MEDIA ACCESS

17. (C) According to Djeddai, opposition parties such as his FFS, the RCD and Islah had not had access to state-controlled television before the election season. In the three weeks immediately prior to the elections, state television featured a daily half-hour block of time devoted entirely to political messages, in which each party was given roughly three minutes of time. Menasra referred to this as "a parade" of messages, trotted out before the viewer in this organized manner at the same time every day. Djeddai, whose FFS fared poorly due primarily to internal divisions, pointed out that several minutes of allotted time every day for three weeks was not enough to level the playing field when for the rest of the year leading up to this period, they were not given the

necessary access to build an identity and a message in the mind of the electorate.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE KABYLIE

18. (C) Several of our observers voted and monitored polling stations in the wilaya of Tizi Ouzou, in the heart of the troubled Kabylie region. In the municipalities of Azzaga and Beni Yenni, which have traditionally supported the RCD and FFS, respectively, the turnout of young voters (under 30 years of age) was significant and represented a majority of those who voted. Sadi confirmed this, saying that the youth turnout in Kabylie was far higher than in the rest of the country. He attributed this to a desire to break the cycle of lawlessness that has gripped the region since 2001. Political scientist Rachid Tlemcani told us December 3 that, in contrast to other parts of the country where voter apathy is attributed to a loss of faith in the state, in Kabylie there is actually a desire, particularly among the younger generation, for the central government to return and re-establish law and order. While the RCD predictably won the elections in Azzaga, the ruling coalition RND carried Beni Yenni after the FFS withdrew its slate owing to deep internal disagreements over whose names to put on the list, according to our observer in Tizi Ouzou.

THE WILD WEST

19. (U) Meanwhile, the overt fighting within and between rival parties of the ruling coalition in the far west of Algeria that we reported in ref B continued on election day, as the RND and FLN struggled for control against each other and against their leadership in Algiers. Press reports featured 15 separate incidents of protests around the country related to the elections, eight of which were concentrated in the wilayas of Tlemcen, Mascara and Relizane. (Note: An additional four or five incidents in various parts of the country were violent clashes between the police and citizens who had sought shelter the night before in the schools scheduled to be used as voting stations. Intense rains during the week prior to the elections had caused flooding and extensive property damage, forcing emergency shelter to become a more immediate issue than the elections. End Note.) The press reports, from El Khabar, Echourouk el Youmi and El Watan, said that crowds angry over election results set fire to the APC offices in the towns of Kalaa and Ain Rahma in the wilaya (province) of Relizane, while others burned the APC

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offices in Mekhtaria, wilaya of Ain Defla. Supporters of the RND, according to Echourouk el Youmi on December 1, took a local FLN candidate and the mayor hostage for several hours in Bourached, also in the wilaya of Ain Defla. On December 1, Echourouk el Youmi reported that rumors of election fraud by the FLN in Ras El Ma, wilaya of Sidi Belabbes, caused election candidates themselves to throw stones at the APC offices.

COMMENT: THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS

110. (C) The Interior Ministry secured an outcome seemingly designed to reinforce the ruling coalition's grip on the country. The results were predictable, and may indeed have laid the groundwork for a 2008 call to revise the constitution in order to allow President Bouteflika to run for a third term (ref D). The problems we heard about the November 29 local elections process are consistent with the problems in the electoral process we have previously reported (ref C), further reinforcing the conclusion that the outcome of the elections was heavily managed by the Interior Ministry. Control of media access, micro-managing and manipulating lists of approved candidates, inflating turnout statistics, sometimes obstructing opposition party observers

at the initial vote count and always obstructing access in vote compilations are old problems in the Algerian election process. In the 2007 local elections, there have been fewer problems with procedures like political party observers watching the actual voting or watching the counts of votes out of the vote boxes, but the other problems seem never to improve. That choice not to fix essential procedures does not bode well for the development of Algerian democracy.

FORD